

200 Proof Love

a sermon based on

Romans 5:1-11

(with reference to John 4:5-42)

and delivered on

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at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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If you've looked at the sermon title in the bulletin – “200 Proof Love” – you may be thinking that I'm going to be talking about liquor, today. If so, you're not exactly wrong. Whether one imbibes or not, most of you are aware of this notion of *proof* as it pertains to the strength of an alcoholic beverage. But have you ever wondered why *proof* is even the measurement? Beverage alcohol is the only substance that uses this measurement.

According to Wikipedia – which is not a citable source for academic work, but which I think is accurate enough in this case – the term *proof* comes from the 1500s in England. Because spirits were taxed at a different rate depending on alcohol content, the government wanted to find a way to measure alcohol content so that it could be sure to collect as much tax as possible. {aside: Some things never change.} What they would do is soak a pellet of gunpowder in alcohol. Because rum with less than 57.15% alcohol by volume would prevent the gunpowder from igniting, any rum over that which would light was considered 100 proof – and therefore taxed as a spirit.¹ Of course by that calculation, 100% alcohol would be about 214 proof. We in the U.S., however, made it easier and rounded so that proof was double percentage, that is 50% was 100 proof and 100% was 200 proof. So there's a quick lesson.

The UK joined the rest of the world in 1980 by measuring alcohol as percent of alcohol by volume (ABV). This helps me to segue a bit.

Even in the US, other beverage alcohol is measured by ABV whether it be beer, wine, mead. Each of these produced by means of fermentation. As many of you know, I am a homebrewer. The way fermentation works is that sugar is converted into alcohol. In the case of beer, sugar is separated from other starches in the grain through a boiling process yielding *wort* (unfermented beer) to which yeast is added. In the case of wine and mead (honey wine) there are enough free sugars available to bypass that extraction step. Yeast then converts the sugars to alcohol.

Grapes already harbor the yeast upon their skins so that unless stopped by pasteurization, initiates fermentation as soon as the juice is squeezed from the grapes. For beer, the brewer adds yeast. So the yeast – this living organism – begins to eat the sugar and then excretes alcohol. Alcohol is basically yeast pee. Think about that the next time “you're in” (pun) the mood for a drink. {I couldn't resist that pun.}

Here's the thing alcohol kills yeast. Once the ABV reaches a certain level the yeast die, and alcohol production ceases. That's why beers are typically between 4-6% ABV and wines between 12.5-14.5% ABV.² With a lot of extra work, and specialized yeasts some of them might get stronger, but the maximum ABV by fermentation alone is about 27-28%. That is highly unusual.

Getting to a higher – or spirit level – ABV requires distillation. Even methods of water extraction such as freezing can only get to about 40% ABV still not spirits. Distillation (what moonshiners do) works by heating up the mash of converted sugars relying on chemistry and physics. Alcohol vaporizes at a lower temperature than water. So as the mash is heated the alcohol vaporizes and rises separating itself from everything else until it is cooled. Because often times impurities come through, it may be distilled multiple times, each time pulling that pure alcohol spirit away from everything else.³ You can't but 200 proof alcohol except from scientific supply houses. Even the strongest beverage alcohol tops out at 190 proof, and it's usually diluted to be drinkable.

So what does this have to do with us? Is the pastor planning a party after church? No. Let's think about this, however. The only way to get pure alcohol is to pull it out of something else. You cannot produce it!

In Romans, today, we hear “(R)arely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alcohol_proof (accessed March 11, 2020)

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alcohol_by_volume (accessed March 14, 2020)

³ <https://vinepair.com/spirits-101/how-distilling-works/> (accessed March 12, 2020)

while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Ro. 5:7-8) We are not perfect. We are sinners; but we are also made in the image of God. That means that for all our flaws and contamination – there’s still something good inside each and every person. This is very Methodist theology – as we tend towards the theologian Arminius against John Calvin’s view of humanity as absolutely depraved with no good or longing for God. Even if there’s not a lot, it’s there – that longing for God. This is what Jesus came for.

Remember last week? John 3:17, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”? I believe that we find forgiveness for our sins through Jesus Christ. But was that his primary purpose? Was his purpose to get rid of the bad that is in us, or to restore and to elevate the good that God made? I think the latter leads to more hope, for us and for the world.

Here’s where that lesson on fermentation and distillation comes in. On our own we are incapable of even getting to that 50% point that is the definition of a spirit. When Jesus warned the disciples to be wary of the yeast of the Pharisees, maybe he was talking about more than their hypocrisy. The Pharisees believed that they could become righteous by excelling at doing the right things, that doing good would convert their carnal nature into spirit. They took it to extremes by becoming more and more rigid and narrow in what constituted good works that it became an obsession. This obsession said: I can make myself good enough. If not, I can make myself better than everyone else. But yeast can only take you so far.

Good works only take us so far. How many people have you heard – even or especially non-believers – say, “I think I’m a good person.” Yet even a righteous person isn’t enough to inspire another. Just like yeast can produce a certain amount of alcohol, good deeds produce a certain amount of good in our lives and joy even some to share. But it can only take us so far.

Maybe that’s the danger of the yeast of the Pharisees: that because doing good and living as righteously as we can actually makes our lives better that people start to think that it is sufficient, when it can’t even get us half way. Ironically, this is why some people don’t even aspire to know Jesus or to grow closer to God in any way.

Jesus is like a distillery. He looks at us and he draws out that inert and innate goodness – that divine imprint – waiting to be unleashed. He doesn’t do it merely by getting rid of the bad. Look at how he talks to people.

Consider that Samaritan woman at the well. It may seem harsh when he mentions that she’s had five husbands. Guess what? She already knew that. It might seem harsh when she questions about the better place to worship and he responds that Samaritans worship what they don’t know and that salvation comes through the Jews. But do we hear what comes next, “the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.”? (Jn 4:23) He’s drawing out on that desire to worship God in spirit and truth. Jesus, instead of telling her what’s wrong and needs to be fixed, acknowledges all of who she is – but works first to draw out the goodness that is in her. That is 200 proof pure love!

We see it when he’s talking to the Canaanite woman who begged for him to free her daughter from a demon. When it sounds like he called her a dog, he pushes her buttons to become more insistent in her yearning for him, so that he acknowledges her faith out loud in the midst the crowd. (Mt 15:22-28) Think about that. Just like the heat under a kettle of mash, he didn’t condemn but drew out her spirit so that a demon fled her daughter. I could keep you here all day with examples of Jesus doing just that. Think about some of those stories that you know about Jesus: isn’t that what he’s doing?

So it is with us. We fall into the trap of the Pharisees, even in the church, when we think of discipleship as merely doing good for others. It is good. It yields good. But we deprive ourselves and others of so much more.

Jesus not only offers us 200 proof love, he invites us to be 200 proof love. In him, we have the capacity to draw out the good and the yearning for God in other, not by focusing on what they lack but by helping them to experience and see the full goodness that that's waiting in each of us to be unleashed. We do that by our example – by claiming that power that Jesus gives us for ourselves. We do that in our relationships with family, friends, acquaintances, even strangers and enemies, when we make a point of finding – exposing – unleashing – something good in them. When that happens, even 200 proof spirits can't compare with the power of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in our lives. AMEN.